ISO 639-3 Registration Authority

Request for Change to ISO 639-3 Language Code

Change Request Number: 2019-062 (completed by Registration authority)

Date: 2019 Aug 31
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PLEASE NOTE: This completed form will become part of the public record of this change request and the history of the ISO 639-3 code set and will be posted on the ISO 639-3 website.

Types of change requests

Type of change proposed (check one):

1. ☐ Modify reference information for an existing language code element
2. ☐ Propose a new macrolanguage or modify a macrolanguage group
3. ☐ Retire a language code element from use (duplicate or non-existent)
4. ☐ Expand the denotation of a code element through the merging one or more language code elements into it (retiring the latter group of code elements)
5. ☒ Split a language code element into two or more code elements
6. ☐ Create a code element for a previously unidentified language

For proposing a change to an existing code element, please identify:

Affected ISO 639-3 identifier: nan
Associated reference name: Min Nan Chinese

5. Split a language code element into two or more code elements

(a) List the languages into which this code element should be split:
   - Hokkien / Hoklo / Quanzhang Chinese
   - Chaoshan Min / Teo-Swa Chinese
   - Datian Min Chinese
   - Leizhou Min Chinese
   - Hainanese Min / Qiong Wen Chinese

(b) Referring to the criteria given above, give the rationale for splitting the existing code element into two or more languages:
The varieties of Min Nan are not mutually intelligible. If ethnic identity were the criterion, then Chinese as a whole would have a single ISO code. ISO instead attempts to reflect mutual intelligibility by following the higher levels of the classification of Li Rong et al in the Language Atlas of China (1987, 2012). However, these ISO-coded clades are not languages based on mutual intelligibility, but clusters of lects, many of which are not
mutually intelligible. The current ISO code assignment misleads the public into thinking that these clades are 'languages'. As Norman (2003, p. 72) notes,

The August 1999 issue of the *National Geographic* contains a map on which it is stated that the Sinitic branch of Sino-Tibetan family ‘includes eight mutually unintelligible languages, often mistakenly called dialects’. This statement, as it stands, is highly misleading. If one takes mutual intelligibility as the criterion for defining the difference between dialect and language, then one would have to recognize not eight but hundreds of ‘languages’ in China; moreover, the eight ‘languages’ referred to in the quote are actually groups of dialects. Wú is not a language but a grouping of numerous non-mutually intelligible local forms of speech. The differences among the Wú dialects are in many cases considerable and it is hard to see how such disparate forms of speech could be considered a single language. The same is true of the other dialect groups: Mandarin, Min, Hakka, Yuè, Gàn, and Xiāng. For the comparativist, Chinese is a vast dialectal complex containing hundreds of mutually unintelligible local varieties, each of which can be viewed as a distinct object for comparison.

The word ‘dialect’, when referring to Chinese, is a translation of 方言 *fāngyán* ‘regional speech’, which, unlike linguistic use of the word ‘dialect’ in English, does not take mutual intelligibility into account (Kurpaska 2010, p. 1).

The comparative work has not been done to establish the mutual intelligibility of the majority of Chinese *fangyan* and establish Norman’s estimated hundreds of abstand languages. As further work is done, therefore, additional splits may be deemed necessary. (For instance, the geographical islands of Zhenan and Zhongshan Min, some dialects of the latter of which may be Min Dong rather than Min Nan. Similarily, Branner (1999b) suggests that the speech of Wan’an may constitute an additional branch of Min.) Nonetheless, at present some broad outlines are clear.

The 1987 *Atlas* does not include Hainanese and Leizhou within Min Nan at all, but lists them as two of the eight primary branches of Min. Their distinctiveness on that basis is comparable therefore to the other primary branches of Min, all of which have ISO codes (except for Shaojiang Min, which is a separate code request). Quanzhang, Datian and Chaoshan are listed as the primary branches of Min Nan in the *Atlas*.

*Ethnologue* 22 says, “Chao-Shan has difficult intelligibility with Amoy [in Quanzhang / Hokkien]; Hainan quite different from other dialects and mutually unintelligible with Hokkien and Teochew [in Chaoshan].”

Branner (1999) argues that Datian (including several dialects of Longyan Min) are a separate branch of Min, intermediate between Min Nan proper and [cdo] Min Dong.

The Quanzhang/Hokkien dialects (Min Nan proper) are mutually intelligible (Cheng 1999)

Thus for [nan] there is reason to break up not just the primary branches of Min per the *Atlas*, but the three branches of Min Nan proper as well.

(c) Does the language code element to be split represent a major language in which there already exists a significant body of literature and research? Are there contexts in which all the proposed separate languages may still be considered the same language—as in having a common linguistic identity, a
shared (or undistinguished) body of literature, a written form in common, etc.? If so, please comment.

The ISO code [nan] might be retained as a macrolanguage within the greater macrolanguage of Chinese. Another possibility is for [nan] to be applied to the first split requested in 5(a), Hokkien/Quanzhang, which is Min Nan in the narrow sense (the dialects of the Minnan triangle of southern Fujian, has the largest population, is what Min Nan is best known for and is often what the name is used to refer to. Certainly, if only Hainanese and Leizhou are split off, it should be unproblematic for [nan] to be reduced to the scope of Min Nan in the Atlas.

In order to complete the change request, the form “Request for New Language Code Element in ISO 639-3” (file name “ISO639-3_NewCodeRequestForm.doc” or “ISO639-3_NewCodeRequestForm.rtf”) must also be submitted for each new identifier that is to be created. That step can be deferred until this form has been processed by the ISO 639-3 registrar.

Sources of information

Please use whichever of the points below are relevant in order to document the sources on which you have based the above proposal.

(a) First-hand knowledge. Describe:

(b) Knowledge through personal communication. Describe:

(c) Knowledge from published sources (please give complete bibliographical references):


Kurpaska, Maria (2010), Chinese Language(s). Walter de Gruyter.

Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2012 edition by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the City University of Hong Kong.


**Please return this form to:**
ISO 639-3 Registrar
SIL International, Office of Language Information Systems
7500 West Camp Wisdom Road
Dallas, Texas 75236 USA
E-mail:  [iso639-3@sil.org](mailto:iso639-3@sil.org)
An email attachment of this completed form is preferred.

**Sources of documentation for ISO 639-3 identifiers:**
Linguist List. Constructed Languages.  [http://linguistlist.org/forms/langs/GetListOfConstructedLgs.html](http://linguistlist.org/forms/langs/GetListOfConstructedLgs.html)